



Wojciech J. Burszta (22 March 1957 – 5 February 2021)

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Abstract

The text is dedicated to the memory of Professor Wojciech J. Burszta.

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He had to leave his family, friends and acquaintances. He also had to leave places to which he was attached: his home in Milanówek, the city of Poznań, where he was born and spent most of his life, his retreat in Kiekrz, and the village of Tarda in Mazury. He had to stop his work but he managed to fulfil all his professional commitments (including a grant and a habilitation review) and to perform (online) the role of a juror at the Piła Crime Fiction Festival (Kryminalna Piła). Still, he did not have enough time to complete his memoir-type book. In retrospect, its planned title: *Umykanie: Pomyślenia z etnografií życia* [Things Elusive: Thoughts on the Ethnography of Life] turned out to be symbolic.

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Wojciech Burszta in Chmielno, Kashubia. Photograph by Hanna Burszta

It was not meant to be his last book. Perhaps, however, preserving important information in words became somewhat of a therapy at the time of his illness, reflecting the desire to capture things that were important only from his perspective. He considered such an “unscientific” approach to be more valuable than any scientific inquiry. Indeed, what is more important than our life? No one, then, will complete this book instead of Wojtek. In the manuscript, he writes:

[...] I am forced to radically revise my life so far, hoping that there will be a “new” one instead of the one I have to abandon. What is more, the situation of the disease causes the revision of almost everything that has been certain, of routine, of everyday obviousness. My imagination is being “transplanted” into a territory hitherto unknown, facing a world that, I thought, concerns others, not me. And still, instead of just standing aside and imagining something that might happen but does not yet embrace me, I am stepping into the midst of a ravaging storm that my life has become in an instant.

Our acquaintance went back to 1998, when Professor Burszta assumed the position of the head of the Department of Nationality Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, an independent research centre at the time. As a boss, he shortened the distance in relations with the staff but this did not depreciate his position in any way. The position of authority figure he enjoyed stemmed from his comprehensive knowledge, from the fact that he was incredibly well read in various types of literature, from his perfect orientation in the current problems of human life, and from his tolerance of people’s otherness, of their views and aspirations. All this enabled Wojtek to become a mentor, stimulating work not only in strictly professional terms but also – in view of human imperfections, both his own and those of others – in terms of striving to be a better person as such. His sense of humour and his sharpness of mind, quite rarely seen today, were something that made contact with him a wonderful intellectual experience, devoid of artificiality on the one hand and full of joy of life on the other. In 2004, the Department of Nationality Studies, including its entire staff and Professor Burszta, became part of the Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, headed by Professor Zbigniew Greń. Until 2018, Wojtek was a staff member of the Institute and a member of its Academic Council; he also continued (from 1998) as the editor-in-chief of the journal *Sprawy Narodowościowe. Seria nowa* [Nationalities Affairs: New Series]. This activity, however, was only a small part of his entire academic work.

He studied ethnography (1975–1979), received his doctorate in ethnology (1984) and his habilitation – in sociology (1993). What had an impact on the emerging research interests of Wojciech Burszta was the work of his father, Professor Józef Burszta, ethnographer, sociologist and historian (although as a young boy Wojtek showed absolutely no understanding for the work pursued by the editorial team of collected works of Oskar Kolberg, headed by his father from 1960). The versatility of Wojciech Burszta’s research interests was reflected in his choice of disciplines: cultural anthropology and cultural studies, as well as in the work he undertook as a critic of contemporary culture, including literature, music and sport. His writings, then, include not only scholarly studies but also essays, which are deeply rooted in the observation of contemporary world, and which in the course of time became his favourite form of expression.

Wojciech Burszta worked at several renowned academic and research institutions: the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (1984–2003, where he created and headed the Department of Studies on Contemporary Culture), the Institute of Humanities at the Warsaw School of Social Psychology

SWPS (where he headed the Department of Cultural Studies), the Oskar Kolberg Institute (as president of the board); he was also the chair of the Cultural Studies Committee, Polish Academy of Sciences (2011–2015). What certainly contributed to his research attitude – which was profound, comprehensive and open to people – were his visiting professorships and study visits at Oxford University, Yale University, University of Illinois, the Sorbonne and other academic institutions abroad. He was also a Fulbright Scholarship holder and received the Kościuszko Foundation scholarship. In 1998, when he had just turned forty, he was appointed full professor by President Aleksander Kwaśniewski. It is worth quoting a passage from an *in memoriam* published on the website of the University of Wrocław, as it fully illustrates Professor Burszta's research stance:

[...] he was a scholar who was independent and open to all socio-cultural phenomena, which he could aptly diagnose and explain in a broad anthropological and cultural context, both in numerous, respected scholarly publications and in sharp journalism. We will remember him as an academic master open to dialogue, a person of great curiosity about the world and other people, a person supporting the young generation of researchers.¹

As a renowned scholar, Wojciech Burszta was a member of editorial boards of a number of Polish and foreign journals. His position also enabled him to support valuable initiatives: he was a founding member of the Jerzy Kmita Institute Foundation (named after a scholar whom he considered his mentor) and the Polish Institute of Anthropology. He was the author of several hundred scholarly publications, including a study which became a textbook (*Antropologia kultury: Tematy, teorie, interpretacje* [Cultural Anthropology: Topics, Theories, Interpretations], Poznań 1998). In recognition of his activity he was awarded the Golden Cross of Merit and other distinctions.

I would also like to mention my personal e-mail contact with Wojtek in recent months. We wrote to each other, referring to our thoughts as "just a chat". He wrote less often than I did. It was about getting over the thought of dying or getting used to it. This is why we did not mention death, and neither did we write about suffering or fear. Wojtek could not stand self-pity; if he were to write about his state from the perspective of his departure, he would rather not have written at all. This is why we shared our thoughts about, for instance, what we read. I would like to share, then, his literary recommendations – he kept reading until the very end, both at hospital and at home. Considering Polish authors, he recommended Olga Tokarczuk (we were not always in agreement about her writing), Szczepan Twardoch (he highly appreciated his latest novel, *Pokora* [Humility]), Jakub Małecki (to whom he referred as a "great talent"); he also read Łukasz Orbitowski and Krzysztof Varga. He was amazed by two series of Lawrence Durrell's novels: *The Avignon Quintet* and *The Alexandria Quartet*. He read all of Jaume Cabré ("for me he is the most

1 Zmarł prof. Wojciech Burszta. (2021, February 6). Uniwersytet Wrocławski, Katedra Etnologii i Antropologii Kulturowej. Retrieved April 6, 2021, from <http://wnhip.uni.wroc.pl/Katedra-Etnologii-i-Antropologii-Kulturowej/Zmarł-prof.-Wojciech-Burszta>

important writer today”, he wrote) and returned to Latin American writers. He also read all of Thomas Bernhard (“I nearly committed suicide”, he wrote when he finished). Considering crime fiction, he did not think much of the recent Polish releases. I would like to conclude this personal note with a quote from our correspondence: “As you can guess, my head’s working fine; I get up at 5 a.m. every day and work until 8; then I read and watch TV series and sometimes I also spend two or three hours at my desk in the afternoon. I can also cope physically, even though chemo makes one a bit weak, but not that much to make a fuss. [...] Keep your fingers crossed, I just won’t give up, no f***** way, and that’s it!!!”

Wojciech J. Burszta (22 marca 1957 – 5 lutego 2021)

Abstrakt

Tekst poświęcony pamięci Profesora Wojciecha J. Burszty.

Słowa kluczowe: Wojciech J. Burszta; antropologia kultury; kulturoznawstwo; „Sprawy Narodowościowe. Seria nowa”

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